

English as a Second Language (ESL): Use of Prepositions

A **preposition** is a word that links together words in a sentence and usually describes position, direction, or time. Each preposition has rules that determine its use.

In:

The preposition ***in*** is used to indicate an enclosed space that is considered an area, such as a geographical location, a room, or a building.

- The children played ***in the park***.
- We waited ***in the lobby***.

Use the preposition ***in*** with objects that act as containers.

- The key is ***in my pocket***.
- Put the groceries ***in the fridge***.

Use the preposition ***in*** when describing what is contained within liquids or other substances.

- Would you like sugar ***in your coffee?***
- There is a lot of fat ***in these cookies***.

The preposition ***in*** can also be used with phrases about time. Use ***in*** when it is followed by these words: ***the past, the present, the future, the morning, the afternoon, the evening, a month, a year, a century, a season***.

- The dog needs to go for a walk ***in the morning***.
- ***In a month***, it will be my birthday.

Use ***in*** to describe the amount of time needed to do something.

- I will be ready ***in a few minutes***.
- ***In two years***, Amy will have her Bachelor's Degree.

Use ***in*** to indicate that something is part of something else.

- There are three gray kittens ***in the litter***.
- I have many old coins ***in my collection***.

Other Preposition Combinations With *In*

be dressed in	be located in	be specialized in	fill in	get in
be interested in	be immersed in	be disappointed in (<i>someone</i>)	break in	drop in
be involved in	be wrapped up in	be caught up in	fall behind in	live in

To:

The preposition ***to*** can indicate movement toward a goal or destination.

- Let's go ***to a restaurant***.
- Melissa is going ***to the University of Virginia***.

However, do not use ***to*** when using verbs of motion with the noun *home*.

- The children ***went home***.
- ***Drive home*** carefully.

The preposition ***to*** is usually used in the following sequence: *subject + verb + to + infinitive*. An **infinitive** is the basic form of a verb such as *eat, work, and play*. Use ***to*** with an infinitive to indicate **willingness** (*be willing, consent, refuse*), **desire** (*desire, wish, prefer, want, request, ask, like*), **intention** (*intend, prepare, plan*), and **obligation** (*be obligated, have, need*).

- Joseph **refuses to cooperate**. (willingness)
subject + verb + to + infinitive
- Do you **want to leave**? (desire)
subject + verb + to + infinitive
- He **planned to return** before midnight. (intention)
subject + verb + to + infinitive
- The dog **needs to eat**. (obligation)
subject + verb + to + infinitive

Other Preposition Combinations With *To*

be accustomed to	complain to (<i>someone</i>)	be opposed to	be married to	prefer (<i>this</i>) to (<i>that</i>)
add (<i>this</i>) to (<i>that</i>)	be devoted to	invite (<i>someone</i>) to (<i>something</i>)	be nice to	be related to
apologize to (<i>someone</i>)	be engaged to	listen to	speak to (<i>someone</i>)	be similar to
belong to	compare (<i>this</i>) to (<i>that</i>)	look forward to	be polite to	introduce (<i>someone</i>) to (<i>someone</i>)

Toward(s):

While *to* indicates arrival at a destination, ***toward*** indicates movement to a destination without actually arriving there. ***Toward*** can also be written as ***towards***. Both forms have the same meaning.

- If you walk ***toward(s) the Testing Center***, you will see Tutoring Services on the right-hand side of the hall.
- Turn ***toward(s) the teacher*** and pay attention.

On:

The preposition ***on*** is used with an enclosed space that is considered a surface.

- We were driving ***on the highway*** when we saw the accident.
- The toddler drew ***on the walls***.

The preposition ***on*** is used with means of public transportation: ***on the train, on the bus, on the plane, and on the boat***. However, use the preposition ***in*** for cars by saying ***in the car***.

- Is this your first time riding ***on a plane?***
- Christy accidentally locked her keys ***in the car***.

The preposition ***on*** is used with phrases about time. Use ***on*** when it is followed by a date, a weekday, or a weekday morning, afternoon, or evening.

- The paper is due ***on March 12***.
- Class is cancelled ***on Friday***, but we still have class ***on Monday morning***.

The preposition **on** is also used with things that can be thought of as lines such as roads or streets.

- I live **on Courthouse Road**.
- Turn right **on Caroline Street**.

Use the preposition **on** with different types of lists.

- What is **on the agenda** for today?
- We forgot an item **on the grocery list**.

Other Preposition Combinations With **On**

hang on	hold on	carry on	dream on	on time
on top of	on break	to give up on (<i>something</i>)	dependent on (<i>something</i>)	be in on (<i>something</i>)

Into/Onto:

Into indicates the movement of someone or something from the outside to the inside of a three dimensional space. On the other hand, **in** indicates the position of the subject after it has completely entered the space. ****Note: Into** can generally be replaced with **in**, but **in** cannot always be replaced with **into**.

- Ann went **into/in her office**.
- Ann is **in her office**. (In this case, **into** cannot be used)

Onto indicates movement toward a two dimensional surface while **on** indicates the position of the subject after it has completely placed itself on the surface. ****Note: Onto** can generally be replaced with **on**, but **on** cannot always be replaced with **onto**.

- Megan fell **onto/on the floor**.
- Megan is **on the floor**. (In this case, **onto** cannot be used)

At:

The preposition **at** is used to describe location, destination, or direction.

- George is waiting **at the fountain**. (location)
- The waiter will be **at your table** in a minute. (destination)
- He threw a baseball **at the window**. (direction)

The preposition **at** is also used with phrases about time. Use **at** when it is followed by these words: **noon, night, midnight, present, the moment, the present time**. Also use **at** when it is followed by a time on the clock.

- Meet me for lunch **at noon**.
- I'm busy **at the moment**, but come back **at 2:00**.

Use **at** to show when someone was a particular age.

- **At age five**, she learned to read.
- Mary published her first book **at age twenty-six**.

Use **at** to show that an activity is directed toward something or someone.

- The monkey threw a banana **at the zoo keeper**.
- The mother yelled **at the children**.

Use **at** to show the cause of a reaction.

- We laughed **at the movie**.
- Lisa is angry **at Robin**.

Other Preposition Combinations With *At*

to be angry at (someone)	arrive at (a building/ a room)	laugh at	look at	point at	stare at
-----------------------------	--------------------------------------	----------	---------	----------	----------

Above/Below:

Use **above/below** to indicate elevation, authority, amount, or temperature.

- The portrait is **above the fireplace**. (higher elevation)
- The vice principal is ranked **below the principal**. (lower authority)
- Kristen's SAT score is **above average**. (higher amount)
- During the snowstorm, the temperature was **below freezing**. (lower temperature)

Use **above all** or **above all else** to mean more than anything else.

- I like this flavor of ice-cream **above all else**.
- **Above all**, Tom works the hardest.

Over/Under:

Use ***over/under*** to indicate a higher or lower position in a straight line.

- To solve this equation, place the 2 ***under the 5*** and subtract. (directly below)
- The sun rose ***over the mountain***. (directly above)

Use ***over / under*** to mean more than/less than.

- George worked as a waiter for ***over two years***.
- I would like to buy a car that is ***under \$13,000***.

Use ***under*** to mean affected by.

- Bill took the day off because he was ***under a lot of stress***.
- The young man was arrested for being ***under the influence of alcohol***.

Use ***over*** to mean during.

- ***Over the past few months***, Jacob has learned to ride a bike.
- What are you doing ***over the weekend?***

Use ***over*** to mean while having a meal or a drink.

- We can discuss the matter ***over lunch***.
- Let's talk about it ***over coffee***.

Use ***over*** to mean spanning or moving across.

- Hang the banner ***over the doorway***.
- We traveled ***over the mountains*** to get there.

Use ***over*** or ***all over*** to mean in many different areas.

- The rumor spread ***all over town***.
- The smoke spread ***over the entire city***.

Use ***over*** to mean on someone or something.

- The widow wore a black veil ***over her face***.
- Pour cookie crumbs ***over the top layer***.